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THE PROCESS OF GERMAN COLLAPSE

Description

This paper outlines the conditions under which an internal collapse of the Nazi regime may be expected. If these conditions prevail, the collapse will be brought about by a military coup d'état in conjunction with domestic upheavals.

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Summary

The problem of the internal collapse of Germany is intimately bound up with military considerations: no collapse can be expected until the plight of German armies is nearing hopelessness. The degree of military deterioration likely to disrupt the functioning of the Nazi control and terror machinery would be reached when the battle fronts have approached the frontiers of Greater Germany and when the hitherto protected regions of Eastern Germany, Czechoslovakia, and Austria are subjected to concentrated air war.

The present Nazi government is determined to fight to the end, but in a situation of military hopelessness it can be assumed that movements for ousting the Nazi government would have a chance of success. Such movements would originate among the masses of the working population, and within the army command.

In view of the disorganization, atomization, and apathy of the masses, this opposition is likely to succeed only if its action coincides with a military coup d'état supported by large parts of the army. Under these circumstances, groups of the Nazi Party, either of "National-Bolshevik" or of "conservative" stripe, may connive in the revolt and desert the present Nazi leadership.

If successful, the coup d'état is likely to establish a National Front government, composed of army leaders, high civil servants, representatives of conservative or neutral business circles, and intellectuals of democratic reputation. Labor leaders may join the government, and the Communists may give it provisional support. The government will sue for peace.

The disruption of the Nazi control machinery is likely to begin and to proceed on the local and regional level; the coup d'état may not succeed in setting up a central government for quite some time, and competing or even conflicting regional "governments" may spring up throughout the Reich. In this case, the small but probably well trained and organized underground groups of the German workers (particularly the Communists) may assume the leadership of the masses and press for radical political changes.

It is unlikely, however, that the movements for ousting the Nazi government will develop into a political revolution. Military occupation of Germany would freeze the situation before revolutionary tendencies could gain momentum.

THE PROCESS OF GERMAN COLLAPSE

The Moscow Agreement has brought into prominence the question of the possible forms of German collapse. The entire problem has been fundamentally changed by the fact that the agreement rules out all prospect of a separate German peace either with the Western Powers or with Russia. The discussion of the forms of German collapse can now be based on the assumption of United Nations unity -- at least with regard to the termination of the war and the destruction of the Nazi regime. This will certainly give encouragement to the genuine anti-fascist opposition in Germany and Austria, and strengthen the forces working for a disintegration of the Nazi system.

In envisaging the situation which might result in German surrender, the German collapse of 1918 may provide a historical analogy. There are several important differences, however, between the situation of 1918 and the present German situation.

In 1918 the German home front had the possibility of expressing its will and of influencing the moment of surrender. In Nazi Germany a ruthlessly efficient totalitarian apparatus makes it extremely difficult for the potential opposition to express itself in political action.

In 1918 the German High Command succeeded in convincing the German Government that, from the military viewpoint, the war was lost and that surrender was the only way out. In present-day Germany, the government is firmly decided to fight to the bitter end. The present leaders of the German Government are well aware (and the Moscow Agreements have made them even more certain) that they can expect no mercy from the victors -- that defeat and surrender mean death for them. The Nazi leaders have identified their fears for their personal safety with the fate of Germany as a nation. Moreover, they cannot hope for a good bargain if they surrender before ultimate defeat. In contrast to the situation of 1918, when the ruling groups and the German people could hope for the preservation of Germany's national unity and independence if they accepted Wilson's Fourteen Points, the Nazi regime and apparently a large part of the German people are convinced that surrender would mean the surrender of Germany's very existence. Thus their will to fight à l'outrance is based on the conviction -- après nous le déluge.

This does not mean necessarily that the war will continue on German soil, and that the Nazis will be able to defend the German cities house by house. The Nazi government may fall before the war has reached the territory of the Reich. This may come about in two ways:

1) the German armies may suffer an integral defeat on the major fronts which will throw them into a state of complete disintegration and enable the Allies to march into Germany without meeting serious resistance. In this case the Nazi regime will collapse together with the army, and political struggles will not have time to develop in Germany. The Nazi government will immediately, or after a short time, be replaced by Allied Military Government or by such authorities as Allied Military Government deems fit to establish in Germany. We shall not discuss this possibility here.

2) the Nazi government may be overthrown while the German armies are still basically intact and stand well outside the German frontiers. The following discussion is concerned with this pattern only. Just how this process will develop cannot, of course, be stated with scientific precision. We will attempt to outline that course of events which, after careful consideration of all factors involved, seems the most likely.

The possibility of an overthrow of the Nazi regime prior to the invasion of German soil by Allied armies can become a real one only when Germany's military situation has considerably deteriorated. The degree of deterioration sufficient to materialize a movement for ousting the Nazi regime may be defined by the following conditions:

a. Withdrawal of the Eastern Front to the vicinity of the Ribbentrop-Molotov line of 1941; loss of Rumania or of the Rumanian oil supply.

b. Advance of the British and Americans in Central and Northern Italy, or invasion of the Balkans which would bring the industrial centers of Eastern Germany, Czechoslovakia, Austria, and Hungary within the range of concentrated air attack.

c. Invasion of Western Europe.

When military operations have reached this stage, the difficulties of the military situation will become so evident and striking that the complete hopelessness of further resistance can no longer be concealed, and the demands of the Nazi leadership for fight à l'outrance may meet effective opposition.

At this future moment, the German domestic situation will be different from its present state. The determination of the Nazi leadership to continue the fight in the face of a rapidly deteriorating military situation will mean increasing terror against all elements of the potential opposition: first of all against German and foreign workers, wholesale execution of Leftists, extermination of the remaining Jews. The terror may even be extended to certain unreliable persons among the industrialists, the Junkers, the civil service, and the army command.

In addition, the Nazi leadership may try to win new mass support by introducing some kind of nationalization of industry and banking, and by elevating some members of the present labor "elite" (politically reliable sub-leaders, foremen, etc.) to the leading positions in management. The "National Bolshevik" ideology may be pushed into the foreground. The SS will have become the mainstay of the system and will entirely dominate the home front.

It is one of the most striking features of modern totalitarian dictatorship that the "morale" and attitude of the masses are of little importance as long as the controls are so strong that the masses cannot move. However, even in a system of Nazi thoroughness, a hopeless military situation may place too much strain on the controlling powers. A local break in the control apparatus may come, for example, after a heavy air raid on one of the large industrial centers: food riots, storming of Party and government offices, occupation of factories by the workers, and refusal to work. The police, the SS, and the regular troops will fight back, as long as such riots remain isolated incidents, and will succeed in quelling them. When they recur more frequently, these disorders will play their part, however, in disrupting the functioning of the terror machine.

Even then, however, the weariness, atomization, and disorganization of the masses may prevent these more or less localized riots from developing into a political revolution. It seems unlikely that the Nazi regime can be overthrown without the help of those groups which have at their disposal an organized force strong enough to contest the Nazi organization. At a first glance, the German industrialists would seem the group most likely to take the initiative in ending the hopeless war by overthrowing the Nazi regime. They are certainly most apprehensive of the danger of a social revolution in Central Europe as the consequence of losing the war, and they may see in the Anglo-Saxon powers the only force willing to guarantee their vested interests and to maintain "law and order." Those industrialists who are not too openly compromised by their support of the Nazi system may try to play off the Western powers against Russia by suggesting a retreat in the West while holding the Eastern front, thus inviting the protection of the Western Powers against the Russians as well as against the radical tendencies within Germany itself. Yet apart from the fact that such a manoeuvre seems hardly practicable from the military point of view (an abandonment of the Western front would inevitably entail a disintegration of the Eastern front), it presupposes a discord between the Western powers and Russia which appears highly unlikely after the Moscow and Teheran agreements. Moreover, the industrialists by themselves do not possess the organized power to carry out such a policy; they would have to rely entirely on the army. The army command very likely dreads the terms of the Western Powers no less than those of the Russians; there are even indications that the army might prefer the Russian terms, for

Russian propaganda has been much less outspoken on the total destruction of the German army than has English and American propaganda. The German Officers Union and the Free Germany Committee in Moscow respond to certain persistent tendencies in the army command, however weak these tendencies at present may be. The army would represent such a force. The internal collapse of the Nazi regime is most likely to occur as the result of a dual action of the rebelling masses and of military putschists. The former have little chance of breaking the Nazi machinery without the help of the latter, and the military is not likely to run the risk of a coup d'état unless civilian upheavals indicate that the situation is ripe. Can we assume that, under the circumstances outlined above, the army command would become the spearhead of a movement for the termination of the war and the ousting of the Nazi regime?

A high degree of sober calculation has always been the strength as well as the weakness of the Prussian officer. Determined to use all weapons and means if they serve the purpose of destroying the enemy, he will have no illusions in recognizing a hopeless situation; as in the past, he will give up the game when he sees that it is lost. The German generals may again, as they did in 1918, try to find a government to sign the capitulation, so that the onus of unconditional surrender will fall not on the army, but on the home front. This time, however, representations of the High Command to the present leaders of the government will be of no avail, and a military coup d'état would be necessary in order to replace the Nazi government by a government that is willing to surrender. It is unlikely that such a putsch will take place at the headquarters of the High Command or in Berlin because it can be assumed that the generals there are most strictly controlled and supervised by the SS and carefully chosen from the point of view of their political reliability. The grip of the SS is less strong, however, on the front and in the other war areas. The commanders of army groups apparently possess enough freedom from supervision to make an independent move possible Action against the present Nazi regime may start among these commanders, probably on the basis of an agreement between different army groups. We may assume that all efforts will be made to maintain the front lines intact, while strong formations are marched homewards in order to set up a government willing to sue for peace. The generals may try to delay the capitulation until the bulk of the German army has been withdrawn behind the borders of the Reich. By surrendering in individual groups and when the armies are still on foreign soil, the generals and the army would forfeit all possibility of influencing the political developments in Germany and would efface themselves from the political scene. Moreover, by surrendering in foreign countries, many German officers and soldiers might be immediately placed before Allied courts as perpetrators of war atrocities. This too might provide a strong motive not to surrender before evacuation of the occupied territories.

The fear of being accused as war criminals will not deter the German generals from overthrowing the present Nazi leadership. Although the Moscow statement on war atrocities clearly points to them as war criminals, they will probably hope that their participation in a movement ousting the Nazi leadership will count in their favor and that in any case they will be able to throw the responsibility for war atrocities on the Nazi Party and the SS.

What will be the reaction -- and counteraction -- of the ruling groups against a military coup d'etat?

SS, SA, and probably parts of the police and the Army will continue to follow the orders of the Nazi government. It is possible, therefore, that the revolt will be quelled and end with a Nazi victory. However, we have assumed that such movements for ousting the Nazi government would only be undertaken when the military situation had become hopeless. In this situation, it seems more likely that the unity of the Nazi leadership will break and that influential groups within the Party will join the revolt. There are two different groups in the Nazi Party which might consider connivance or even participation in an army revolt.

The one is the National Bolshevik wing of the Nazi Party, to which Goebbels formerly belonged, but which is now represented in the leadership of the Party only by Erich Koch; certain parts of the Himmler group might also be inclined to follow such a line.

The other is the conservative wing, best represented by Goering. Many Nazis of the higher civil service and of the economic organizations belong to this group, which has close relations with the army leadership.

It seems possible, therefore, that the military putschists will come to an agreement with either Bolshevist or conservative groups of the Nazi Party, or that these groups, once the movement has started, will prevent resistance against the coup and support it. Large portions of the German and foreign workers will also support the rebellion, and will paralyze the Nazi regime on the local level by strikes, sabotage, and acts of individual terror.

If the coup succeeds and Hitler and the present leadership are ousted, what will be the character of the succeeding government? We have indicated that such a coup may win out as a result of a combined revolt or army and home front. This revolt may have the support of either the National Bolshevik or the conservative wing of the Nazi Party. The new government will, paradoxically enough, be very much the same in any of these contigencies. It will probably be composed of a number of somewhat colorless higher civil servants, a few army leaders, representatives of conservative or "neutral" business circles and

perhaps some prominent church leaders; an attempt to secure the co-operation of some labor leaders can be expected. It is probable that a few men with a democratic reputation will be pressed to participate, in order to emphasize the good intentions of the government. Most revealing of the real forces behind this government will be whether it includes representatives of German labor, and whether these are chosen from the reformist or revolutionary wing. The program would probably be that of a National Peace Front, striving to make the best of "unconditional surrender" and, above all, to prevent the dismemberment of the Reich. Certain measures like renunciation of all conquests, abandonment of all annexed territories (including Austria), seizure of the top Nazis, abolishment of all Nazi laws based on racial and religious discrimination will be enacted. Organizations of the Nazi Party, such as the SS, SA, etc. would go underground, which means they will put off their uniforms, return to civil life, probably in regions where they are unknown, but maintain a certain connection among themselves, and thus form the nucleus for the revival of nationalistic movements and ideas in Germany.

If the coup d'état takes place during widespread upheavals and meets with heavy regional resistance, it may happen that a central government cannot be formed at once, and that, in the different regions of Germany, various political and military committees or governments, only loosely connected with each other, will be established. Germany under the Nazis has become so thoroughly and rigidly centralized, however, that the absence of a central government will create immense practical difficulties and dislocations. Also, many Germans will fear that the lack of a central government might facilitate plans for a dismemberment of Germany and will press, therefore, for immediate formation of such a government. Still, the probable pattern of German collapse is first local disruption, and only afterwards alteration of the central government. If the Allied troops penetrate very quickly into Germany, they might find only various local and regional governments, but no central government.

So far we have assumed that the movement against the Nazi government will be led and concluded by the putschist groups in the Wehrmacht, although the putsch will be originated by serious local upheavals on the home front (see above p. 3). We cited the atomization and apathy of the German masses as the factor that may relegate them to a contributory role in the movement for ousting the Nazi leadership. Yet while it is likely that the German (and foreign) workers will not be able to lead this movement during its initial stage, they may play an increasingly decisive part as the movement gains momentum. The military coup d'état cannot proceed without disrupting -- at least temporarily -- the terroristic controls of the Nazi regime, and this in turn is bound to give rise to ever more active opposition of the workers.

There still exist the nuclei of a political underground opposition among the German workers, and the coup d'état may give them enough opportunity for action.

The best organized and ideologically strongest group among the underground movement will probably be the Communists. If a central government is quickly established, and if this government offers them adequate representation (which is not very likely), they will probably join the United Peace Front. Because the declared policy of the Communist party is collaboration with other anti-fascist forces in a democratic framework during the immediate post-war period, they will not fight for the dictatorship of the proletariat, nor will they press for socialist measures. If, however, the putsch is retarded by widespread struggles on the local and regional level, if the leadership does not succeed in asserting itself against the contesting factions in the Nazi Party and in the Army, the masses may be radicalized, and the politically well trained and determined underground groups may be driven to pursue a revolutionary course. The convulsive upheavals which are bound to accompany the downfall of the Nazi regime may develop into a political revolution if the antagonistic forces of German society are left to their own fate without outside interference.

It is unlikely that events will go so far, however. Before such a revolution gains momentum, the Allied troops would be in occupation of German territory, and military government would freeze the social situation at the point reached at the beginning of the occupation period.

This is the perplexing dilemma which the Allies will face. In order to make sure of their victory and to remove the German danger, they will have to march into Germany and to occupy her, but in doing so, they will probably prevent the anti-Nazi reaction of the progressive forces then coming to its fulfilment, and thereby will prevent a solution of the German problem which would probably give a better guarantee of future peace than any peace treaty could provide.